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THREE MAIN ISSUES OF SIMPLE PREPOSITIONS IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

This paper explores the three main challenges or issues involving simple English prepositions, namely single word prepositions, such as *about*, *on*, *to* and *with*. Even though there exist approximately 50 commonly used simple prepositions, learners of the English language who attempt to speak and write grammatically and semantically face numerous prepositional issues constantly. Categorically, the three main issues are incorrect, unnecessary and omitted prepositions. The data, consisting of mistakes in using simple prepositions, were collected from written products, for example, compositions in paragraph writing and seminar papers, of the students of the English Language Education Study Programme of Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta. Presumably, the collected mistakes are also commonly made by other learners of English at different proficient levels, including high school students and even teachers as well as lecturers. Accordingly, it is essential to (re-)examine the prepositional issues, particularly factors causing problems for learners to use simple prepositions correctly. One of the roots of the prepositional problems is the tendency of learners to use their first language to translate prepositions (from Indonesian, for instance) into English, as in *diskusi tentang ...* "discuss about ..." (which is ungrammatical because the verb *discuss* must not be followed by the preposition *about*). It is expected that this paper can assist learners of English, including teachers and lecturers, to be more aware of simple preposition challenges and afterwards be capable of using the simple prepositions grammatically and semantically.

Keywords: simple preposition, omitted preposition, mistake

Introduction

Let us observe this sentence: In this paper, the focus of attention is on three main issues re simple prepositions used by English learners at various levels when trying to express their opinions about different topics. Now, the question is how many simple prepositions exist in the sentence above. Is the correct answer: four, five, six or seven prepositions? Well, the correct answer is that there are seven simple prepositions, namely *in*, *of*, *on*, *re*, *by*, *at*, and *about*. As a lecturer – and at the same time as a learner of the English language, the current writer has also found it hard to master, or more precisely, to use simple prepositions grammatically and semantically based on a given context (Bram: 2002, 2012). For example, what preposition should be used in the following: are these grammatical English: *in May?* *on 10 May?* *in 2018?* *replies to questions?* *reasons for asking?* Note that all the phrases above are good, grammatical (selected) examples. In practice, it is common for us to come across, for instance, the use of "same with ..." instead of *similar to* ... (wrong preposition) and the use of "discuss about ..." which is ungrammatical because the verb *discuss* must not be followed by the preposition *about*.

Why are prepositions difficult for learners of English to master? One fundamental reason, as Swan (2006: 425) says, is that "many nouns, verbs and adjectives are normally used with particular prepositions: we say the reason *for*, arrive *at*, angry *with* somebody, on *a* bus". If this is the case, is it all right for learners to guess? Surely, it is fine for them to do so, but often the correct preposition cannot be guessed, and one has to learn the expression as a

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This paper explores the three main challenges or issues involving simple English prepositions, namely single word prepositions, such as *about*, *on*, *to* and *with*. Even though there exist approximately 50 commonly used simple prepositions, learners² of the English language who attempt to speak and write grammatically and semantically face numerous prepositional issues constantly. Categorically, the three main issues are incorrect, unnecessary and omitted prepositions. The data, consisting of mistakes in using simple prepositions, were collected from written products, for example, compositions in paragraph writing and seminar papers, of the students of the English Language Education Study Programme of Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta. Presumably, the collected mistakes are also commonly made by other learners of English at different proficient levels, including high school students and even teachers as well as lecturers. Accordingly, it is essential to (re-)examine the prepositional issues, particularly factors causing problems for learners to use simple prepositions correctly. One of the roots of the prepositional problems is the tendency of learners to use their first language to translate prepositions (from Indonesian, for instance) into English, as in *diskusi tentang ... *discuss about ...* (which is ungrammatical because the verb *discuss* must not be followed by the preposition *about*). It is expected that this paper can assist learners of English, including teachers and lecturers, to be more aware of simple preposition challenges and afterwards be capable of using the simple prepositions grammatically and semantically.

Keywords: simple preposition, omitted preposition, mistake

Introduction

Let us observe this sentence: In this paper, the focus of attention is on three main issues re simple prepositions used by English learners at various levels when trying to express their opinions about different topics. Now, the question is how many simple prepositions exist in the sentence above. Is the correct answer: four, five, six or seven prepositions? Well, the correct answer is that there are seven simple prepositions, namely *in*, *of*, *on*, *re*, *by*, *at*, and *about*. As a lecturer -- and at the same time as a learner of the English language, the current writer has also found it hard to master, or more precisely, to use simple prepositions grammatically and semantically based on a given context (Bram: 2002, 2012). For example, what preposition should be used in the following; are these grammatical English: *in May? on 10 May? in 2018? replies to questions? reasons for asking?* Note that all the phrases above are good, grammatical (selected) examples. In practice, it is common for us to come across, for instance, the use of **same with ...* instead of *similar to ...* (wrong preposition) and the use of **discuss about ...*, which is ungrammatical because the verb *discuss* must not be followed by the preposition *about*.

Why are prepositions difficult for learners of English to master? ¹ One fundamental reason, as Swan (2006: 425) says, is that "many nouns, verbs and adjectives are normally used with particular prepositions: we say *the reason for*, *arrive at*, *angry with somebody*, *on a bus*". If this is the case, is it all right for learners to guess? Surely, it is fine for them to do so, but "often the correct preposition cannot be guessed, and one has to learn the expression as a

whole" (Swan, 2006: 425). What is more, as Swan (2007: 61) points out, "in some expressions English has no preposition where one may be used in another language; in other expressions the opposite is true".

Literature Review

Linguistically, the part of speech *preposition* is categorized as a closed class word, meaning that this word category accepts no new members. "A preposition is a word that links a noun or a noun equivalent (eg a pronoun or a gerund) to another word by expressing such relationships as location (eg *at, on, in over*), direction (eg *to, across, towards*), time (eg *before, after, during*) or purpose (eg *to, for*)" (Aik & Hui, 1999: 187). Note that the number of common prepositions in English is interestingly small, totalling 45 members, namely: "*about, above, across, after, against, along, among, around, at, before, behind, below, beneath, beside, besides, between, beyond, by, despite, down, during, for, from, in, into, like, near, of, off, on, out, over, since, through, throughout, till, to, toward(s), under, until, up, upon, with, within, without*" (Azar & Hagen, 2009: 440). More specifically, Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G. & Svartvik, J. (1992: 665-7) say that there are 60 categories of prepositions in English, namely simple prepositions (consisting of a single word, such as *in, at and for*) and complex prepositions (consisting of two or three words, such as *apart from, due, on behalf of and in front of*). Regarding the number of words in a preposition, Collins Cobuild (1994: 296) mentions that "most prepositions are single-word although there are some that consist of more than one word, such as 'out of' and 'in between'".

Further, Collins Cobuild (1994: 296) states that "a preposition is a word which opens up the possibilities of saying more about a thing or an action, because you can choose any appropriate noun group after it as its object". For instance, we may say or write: *on the screen, under the screen, above the screen, beside the screen, near the screen*. This means that (simple) prepositions are frequently used to express various, different meanings.

In the literature, numerous authors, such as Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G. & Svartvik, J. (1992); Fitikides (2002); Swan (2006, 2007) and Azar & Hagen (2009), have discussed English prepositions, including common mistakes involving prepositions. For example, Hancock (2001: 46) exemplifies the use of the adjective *good* plus a simple preposition "**My sister is very good in cooking*" (People are good or bad at something) and "**My sister is very good at cooking*". Note that the symbol * (an asterisk) preceding a sentence means that the sentence is ungrammatical. In connection with the phrase *be married* plus a simple preposition, (Hancock, 2001: 46) presents an ungrammatical construction and then a corrected version as follows: "**I didn't know that Anna was married with Paul*" (grammatically incorrect) and "*I didn't know that Anna was married to Paul*" (grammatically correct).

Based on his data analysis, Bram (2005) points out that in "the compositions written by approximately 50 students, representing two writing classes at Sanata Dharma University, the common preposition mistakes may be classified into three types". In Bram's (2005) study, the 50 students were divided into two subgroups. "The first group, Writing A of the English Extension Course (EEC), had 20 learners, and the second one, Writing V of the English Education Programme, consisted of 30 students" (Bram, 2005). All the mistakes involving simple prepositions were collected from those 50 students, who were assigned to write one-paragraph compositions. As reported in Bram (2005), "the three types of problems involving prepositions are as follows. The asterisk * means unacceptability. (1) **similar with*, instead of *similar to* (wrong preposition), (2) **reply your message*, instead of *reply to your message* (omitted preposition) and (3) **discuss about our plans*, instead of *discuss our plans* (redundant preposition)". Seeing the three kinds of preposition issues, we now might want to ask why the 50 learners made the mistakes. "It is concluded that the above prepositional

problems," as Bram (2005) says, "were triggered by the interference of Indonesian, Malay or other languages/dialects spoken by the students".

Study Data

The data of this study, consisting of mistakes in using simple prepositions, were collected from 30 answer sheets (a 10-question questionnaire concerning the use of simple prepositions) distributed in a Paragraph Writing class (30 semester two students) and seminar papers written by approximately 32 semester eight students (group works) of the English Language Education Study Programme of Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta. The data were collected in March 2013. The questionnaire, consisting of 10 multiple choice (A, B, C, D) items, was distributed to the 30 students on 14 March 2013. The students answered the 10 questions in each questionnaire individually without referring to or consulting any sources (closed book). In the questionnaire, it is written that the items challenge learners of English to use of simple prepositions in English correctly. Thus, the participants were requested to choose the best answer to complete the following sentences grammatically. The completed questionnaires were then collected and analyzed by the current writer by calculating and categorizing the given answers. The present author aims to (re-)examine preposition issues, particularly factors causing problems for learners to make errors or mistakes in using simple prepositions in the English language. As for data from seminar papers, the current writer read through all the seminar papers, totalling 12, which were compiled in an unpublished proceeding, in order to count the total number of preposition mistakes found in the 12 seminar papers.

Findings and Discussion

Based on the answers to the 10-question questionnaire distributed to 30 students taking the Paragraph Writing class, the current writer found the following results.

Regarding the first item *We will discuss ... the proposal tomorrow*, it is surprising that none of the 30 students had a correct answer; all of them were wrong because they chose option A. The details are as follows: A. about (30 = 100%), B. on (0 = 0%), C. of (0 = 0%), D. none of the above (0 = 0%). The answer is D (none of the above). The chart below summarizes the details of the students' answers to question 1.

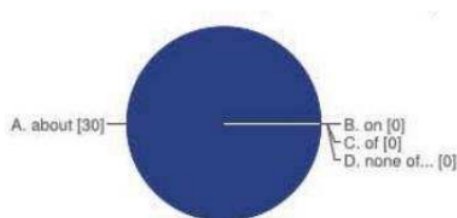


Chart 1 *discuss*

Note that the verb *discuss* functions is "a transitive verb and needs an object" (Turton & Heaton, 2002: 101).

For the second item, *The participants have responded ... the questions*, the results are as follows: A. at (1 = 3%), B. to (26 = 87%), C. about (3 = 10%), D. none of the above (0 = 0%). The summary is represented in Chart 2 below.



Chart 2 *respond*

In the third item *The new students look forward ... hearing good news*, it is shown that the answers are as follows: A. toward (4 = 13%), B. by (15 = 50%), C. to (6 = 20%), D. none of the above (5 = 17%). The details can be summarized in Chart 3 below.

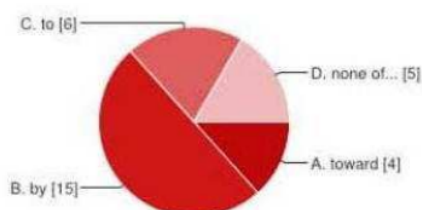


Chart 3 *look forward*

Next, in the fourth item *Did the reviewers comment ... their research plans?*, we can see that most students (87 per cent) can answer correctly, with the following distribution: A. on (26 = 87%), B. with (0 = 0%), C. in (4 = 13%), D. none of the above (0 = 0%). Chart 4 summarizes the details.

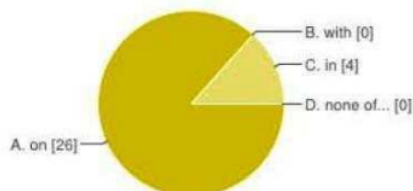


Chart 4 *comment*

In item five *My friend has replied ... my email, which I sent two days ago*, we observe that the results are as follows: A. in (7 = 23%), B. with (0 = 0%), C. to (17 = 57%), D. none of the above (6 = 20%), which can be summarized in Chart 5 below. Note that 57 per cent of the students answered the question correctly.

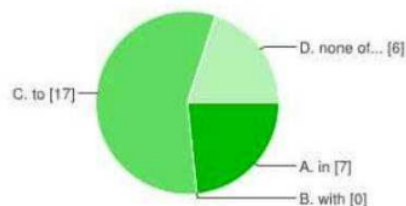


Chart 5 *reply*

Now, let us observe item 6: *Some people might object ... their open criticism*. The answers are as follows: A. in (7 = 23%), B. to (12 = 40%), C. about (3 = 10%), D. none of the above (8 = 27%). The correct answer (*to*) is 40 per cent, and the summary is in Chart 6 below.

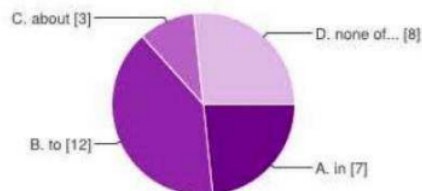


Chart 6 *object*

In the seventh item *Our final exams will be held ... June*, most students answered wrongly; 27 of them (90%) chose the preposition *on*. The correct choice is *in*. The details are as follows: A. on (27 = 90%), B. at (1 = 3%), C. in (2 = 7%), D. off (0 = 0%). See Chart 7 for the summary.

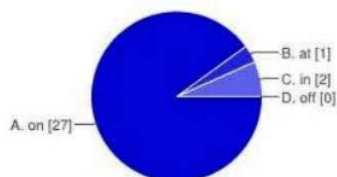


Chart 7 ... *June*

In item eight *New Year's Day is ... 1 January*, we see that 22 participants (73%) answered successfully by choosing the preposition *on*. The details are as follows: A. of (0 = 0%), B. in (1 = 3%), C. at (7 = 23%), D. on (22 = 73%) and the summary is in Chart 8 below.

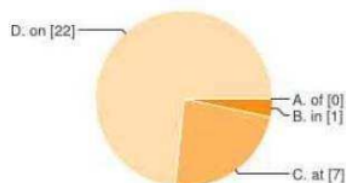


Chart 8 ... *1 January*

How about item nine? Well, we see that the answers to *The dictionary in the corner is the same ... the one on the desk* are as follows: A. with (6 = 20%), B. in (0 = 0%), C. as (23 = 77%), D. to (1 = 3%). There were 23 students who answered correctly, reaching 77 per cent (as).

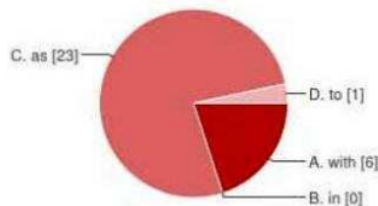


Chart 9 *same*

In the last item, question 10 *Many houses in the area look similar ... one another*, we can see that 40 per cent of the participants answered correctly (*to*) and that 47 per cent of them chose the preposition *with*. Here are the details: A. about (0 = 0%), B. to (12 = 40%), C. as (4 = 13%), D. with (14 = 47%). The summary is in Chart 10.

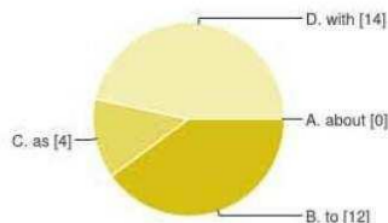


Chart 10 *similar*

As shown above (items 1-10 and Charts 1-10), simple prepositions in English remain problematic for learners. This situation is line with what Swan (2006: 426) says: "It is not always easy to know which preposition to use after a particular noun, verb or adjective". We also realize that there are clear or reliable clues for learners of English to decide correctly which simple prepositions to use in a certain context. Quite often, certain verbs, nouns and adjectives have their own preposition 'partners', such as *reply to* (a request), *on foot* and *curious about*.

The second data source, namely an unpublished proceeding containing 12 seminar papers written by the English Language Education Study Programme students, batch 2009 group VII D of a Seminar on Language Teaching (SLT) class (academic year 2012/2013). Examples of mistakes in using simple prepositions are presented in the following. First, the verb *comment* was used with a redundant preposition. "However, if students read more about some reading passages, they can build a critical reading, which is the skill that they can criticize, argue, and ***comment about** the idea in the reading passages itself." Second, the verb *discuss* was also used with an unnecessary preposition, namely *about*. "The following explanation ***discusses about** the data related to delivering a speech for speaking learning." "Why you did not ***discuss further about** the school (*SD Kanisius Demangan Baru*)?" "The researchers are going to ***discuss more about** what TPR is and how to implement this method to teach English for senior high school students."

Further, we can see that the verbs *reply* and *respond* were also used ungrammatically (without the simple preposition *to*). "We asked a question via email to Paul, surprisingly He ***replied** our email and answered our question by sending us the list of vocabulary that is used by ESL students" and "Students can be trained to ***respond** instruction quickly", "Then, their ability in listening is obtained by ***responding** their parent's commands." "The third table presents the participants' ***respond toward** statements number five and seven." "In Critical Reading and Writing subject, their lecturer applied many kind activities in order to develop students' critical thinking in ***responding** any kinds of reading text."

Regarding the use of *same*, we see that it was used incorrectly with the preposition *with*, as in "It can be a burden for students as what they learn is not ***same with** what they face in reality." "The definition is almost ***same with** the definition taken from *Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary*, which states that 'authentic' means something that is known to be real and genuine and not a copy." "The text about Singapore has the ***same problems with** the

previous text, San Francisco.” Finally, it is also observable that the adjective similar was used incorrectly, taking a wrong preposition *with*, instead of *to*, as in “They are vocabulary, difficult sentence structure of topic sentence, and the topic of the reading passage that is not ***similar with them**”.

Concerning the study results presented above, the current writer would like to offer the following causes. First is the guessing strategy; learners of English tend to guess what/which simple prepositions to use. Second is the translation strategy (particularly translating from Indonesian, Malay and Javanese into English). Third is insufficient exposure of grammatically and semantically English.

Conclusion and Suggestion

To wrap up the paper, the current writer would stress that three main problems related to the use of simple preposition, namely incorrect, omitted and redundant prepositions. Note also that two of the roots of the preposition problems are the tendency of learners to use their first language to translate prepositions (from Indonesian, for instance) into English and the strategy for guessing what prepositions to use.

The present writer would suggest that learners of English enrich their exposure to good English and consult a comprehensive English frequently. It is also essential to remember that “few people acquire new languages perfectly after late childhood and it is normal for non-native speakers to make mistakes (including foreign language teachers, who need not feel guilty if they sometimes get things wrong” (Swan, 2007: 61).

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